



ASPARUKH

ASPARUKH, a Middle Iranian proper name attested in ancient Georgia and early medieval Bulgaria (Grecized as Asparoukis); apparently the name was current in the Caucasus and in the Central Asian region where the proto-Bulgars originated. It is a compound with the prior element *aspa-* “horse;” the second element may be derived from the root **rauk* “shine,” i.e., “he who has shining horses.” Among the bearers of this name are:

1. Pitiakhsh (*bdeakhsh*, *vitaxa*, Mid. Pers. *bidaxš*) of Iberia (eastern Georgia), probably during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian (117-38 A.D.). The dignity of *pitiakhsh* approximated to that of satrap. Those of Iberia formed a dynasty of viceroys or co-kings ruling alongside the monarchs of Iberia; and they flourished throughout the 1st-3rd centuries A.D. They had a hereditary necropolis at the ancient Georgian capital, Mtskheta/[Armazi](#). Pitiakhsh Asparukh is known solely from his sardony intaglio signet-ring gem, recovered from Grave I of this necropolis. His name and title are clearly engraved in Greek script; and he is depicted in right profile, bearded, with prominent nose, and upper torso bare. This individual and realistic likeness is a rare example of authentic, pre-Christian Georgian portraiture.

2. Sublime Khan of the proto-Bulgars and founder of the medieval Bulgarian state. He reigned at Pliska in northeast Bulgaria, 679-701 A.D., and is celebrated for his decisive victory over the Byzantine emperor, Constantine IV Pogonatus, in 680. His name is also given in medieval sources as Isperikh. One of his predecessors bore the name Bezmer, possibly from Iranian Burz-Mihr (“High is Mithra”). Such names underline the cultural contacts between the



proto-Bulgars and the Iranian world, especially with the Alans and Sarmatians of the northern Caucasus and south Russia. The figure of the Madara horseman, carved on a high cliff near Pliska by one of Asparukh's successors, recalls the use of equestrian rock reliefs in Sasanian Iran.

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The etymological connection with Khot. *rūkyāṃ* (hapax) suggested by H. W. Bailey, *BSOAS* 42, 1972, pp. 207-08, is highly doubtful, since *rūkyāṃ* is most likely to be an error for *bīrūkyāṃ*, Turk, *buyruq* "commander," in a badly written text.

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